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ABSTRACT

Conditions in schools that reduce the effectiveness and perceived value of instructional supervision can be diagnosed and corrected through a cyclical process called "organizational learning." Rather than merely responding to symptoms, this method focuses on eliminating or mitigating the underlying causes of "organizational errors." Under this author's guidance, a residential school for the handicapped conducted an organizational learning activity as part of a 7-day inservice program on instructional supervision. Before instruction began, the participants (mostly senior administrators) each recorded in writing their thoughts on the school's supervisory process. These reports, as well as interviews with and observation of the participants, were used to prepare a hypothetical "map" of organizational behavior. This "map," which was unanimously approved by the group, identified a variety of problems in the school, some of which were "open secrets": that is, they were well known among the school staff, yet undiscussable. Much concern focused on a cycle of destructive attitudes and behavior set off by the superintendent's autocratic management. As a result of this trend the school's problems had become a barely manageable series of crises. Openly discussing such issues is a step toward establishing a climate for effective supervision. (MCG)

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The Case of the "Open Secrets:" Increasing the Effectiveness of Instructional Supervision

by

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Why is instructional supervision less than effective and not highly valued by teachers and supervisors? Assuming that the quality of the models of supervision used in schools is within acceptable limits and assuming that supervisors have the minimum competencies required for supervision, it is predicted that supervision is generally ineffective and not highly valued because there are conditions within the schools which reduce the effectiveness and value of the supervisory process. These conditions include unhealthy group norms for organizational behavior, policies and procedures for supervision that are not well thought out, and dysfunctional administrative behavior within the traditional organizational structure of schools.

The position taken in this article is that if the effectiveness and value of any model of supervision is to be increased, then the conditions within the schools which negatively affect instructional supervision must be diagnosed and corrected. Diagnosis and correction are part of a cyclical process which is called organizational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978).

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning is a process for discovering conditions for organizational error, inventing solutions for the errors, producing the solutions and evaluating and generalizing the effects of the solutions. This process not only focuses on responding to the symptoms of the errors, but also on eliminating or lessening the effects of the underlying causes

of the errors. Organizational learning is an on-going process rather than a singular diagnostic event.

Organizational Learning-in-Use

As an example of how the process of organizational learning can be applied to the problem of increasing the effectiveness of instructional supervision, I would like to share with you a brief description of a real-life intervention. The description presented below describes some of the entry-level activities of the intervention and some initial findings--it is not a full case study report.

I was asked to come to a residential school for a handicapped student population to respond to a need to increase the effectiveness of instructional supervision. This intervention was to take the form of seven days of instruction on the theory and practice of instructional supervision. Additionally, with the permission of the participants in the course, the instruction was coupled with organizational learning activities with a sharp focus on the supervisory process.

The participants in the learning activities were, with two exceptions, all members of the school's senior administrative team. This group included the Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent, the Public Relations Officer, 4 Division Heads, 1 Assistant Division Head, 1 teacher who was a candidate for a vacant supervisory position, and 1 classroom teacher who was invited by the team to attend the course.

Prior to my arrival, each participant was required to prepare a written case study describing their perceptions of the supervisory process within the school--its strengths, weaknesses, etc. The participants were asked not to identify or describe specific individuals, but to focus on the process of supervision as they perceived it.

After my arrival, a diagnostic process was begun which included an analysis of each of the case studies, interviews of individuals using a non-threatening conversational mode, and observations of the participants as they interacted in the formal classes on supervision. Using these diagnostic data, a hypothetical map of organizational behavior was constructed. This map was presented to the participants as a diagnostic report during the final days of the intervention.

The diagnostic findings were put before the group so that they could confirm or disconfirm the validity of the data. Without exception, each member of the group confirmed the validity of the diagnostic findings. These diagnostic data identified two levels of problems: superficial and deep. The superficial problems focused on the technical problems of supervision; e.g., the lack of time. The deeper level problems focused on interpersonal issues, especially within the administrative team itself.

The Diagnostic Map

As discussed above, in preparation for the course on instructional supervision and for the organizational learning activities, each of the participants was asked to prepare a case study describing individual perceptions of the process of instructional supervision within the school. This case study project provided the members of the team with an opportunity to discuss issues which had been previously undiscussable. This inference was supported by statements from the case studies such as "I would appreciate your discretion in the utilization of these data. Some things can't be changed and are best left unsaid."; and, "I have

found this case study to be most difficult but revealing." The words "unsaid" and "revealing" suggested that some of the issues which were surfaced in the case studies had been previously undiscussable.

Not only were there undiscussable problems, but it was my inference that there were some deeper organizational problems which were generally unaccessible to outsiders. This inference was made by piecing together bits and pieces of the diagnostic data from the case studies, interviews, and observations. It was fascinating to note that some of the apparently inaccessible problems were what I refer to as "open secrets," whereby members of the team knew that these problems existed, may have even discussed them with one or two close associates, but never discussed them as a team or with people from outside the organization. Thus, everybody knew that these problems existed, but they all acted as though the problems were secrets when they met as a team.

Many of the problems that the school was facing were related to the history of the school. The present superintendent entered the school's social system in 1977. At that time the school was in a tail-spin. This situation was characterized by extraordinary environmental (e.g., compliance with P.L. 94-142) and internal (e.g., high rates of administrative turnover--6 superintendents between 1972-1977) pressures. Additionally, the superintendent and his administrative team had insufficient levels of technical and interpersonal skills to manage effectively some of the more difficult and complex problems that they were facing. For example, given the extraordinary environmental and internal pressures in combination with the need to regain control of the organization, the

superintendent and his administrative team tried some innovative managerial techniques (e.g., shared decision-making). But when quick results from applying these techniques were not forthcoming, the administrators returned to their traditional management style: directive, unilateral leadership.

For the superintendent and his team, the consequences of their directive and unilateral behavior were 1) dysfunctional group dynamics (e.g., win/lose behavior among the administrative team members), 2) dysfunctional intergroup dynamics (e.g., polarization of issues into "us vs. them," especially between the academic program of the school and the business office), and 3) dysfunctional organizational norms and activities (e.g., games of deception, covert undermining of the school's goals, and expectations that the school was brittle and unchangeable). These consequences reduced the long-term effectiveness of the team and the school. In perceiving this decreased effectiveness, the administrators rationalized the need to increase their directive and unilateral behavior (the root cause of many of the problems), which in turn completed the self-sealing cycle of dysfunction again and again.

The directive and unilateral behavior of the administrators, which was originally motivated by their extraordinary professionalism, their need to meet deadlines, and their need to be accountable, overburdened them. As they assumed more and more ownership of the tasks that needed to be accomplished, they lost their flexibility and their potential to respond to unanticipated events. They were so caught up in the day-to-day (a phrase used frequently in the case studies) operations, that it

soon became a matter of day-to-day survival. Thus, unanticipated deadlines became crises which demanded immediate attention. The crisis-to-crisis pattern of management placed severe psychological and physical stress on the administrators, thus tending to affect negatively their morale and health (the superintendent even suffered a heart attack in 1979).

Conclusion

So what does all of the above have to do with increasing the effectiveness of instructional supervision? The fact is that the behavior and attitudes of the leaders in the above school were producing negative consequences throughout the entire school. There was low morale, loss of self-motivation, avoidance of responsibility, dependence, hostility and/or apathy toward the administration, high rates of teacher absenteeism, lack of commitment to the goals of the organization, polarization of in-school issues into "us vs. them," win/lose dynamics where people withheld information needed by the decision-makers, and camouflaging of true feelings or opinions which resulted in covert efforts to "screw things up." Instructional supervision, i.e., helping teachers to improve instruction and to grow professionally, cannot be effective within an organizational climate such as this.

The school described in this article is not unique. I suspect that the description of the behaviors and their consequences would fit many schools. Thus, I am suggesting that if the effectiveness of instructional supervision is to be increased, then organizational

behavior within the schools must be diagnosed to identify those problems and issues which are negatively influencing the supervisory process. With this diagnostic information, then, courses of action need to be designed and implemented to correct or ameliorate the problems on an on-going basis. As this process of organizational learning continues in the school, the conditions within which supervision can be effective will develop.

REFERENCES

Argyris, Chris and Schön, Donald A. (1978). Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Co.)